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SUBJECT: AVIAN FLU: INVITING FRANCE TO AN INTERNATIONAL  
PARTNERSHIP - FRENCH HESITATE

REF: SECSTATE 162129

11. (SBU) Summary: On September 8, Ambassador met with Health Minister to press the French to pursue, together with the United States, a leadership role in the International Partnership on Avian and Pandemic Influenza. While the Minister agreed that avian flu preparedness required concerted international effort, spoke highly of the U.S.-French health relationship, and had no reservations about the core principles of the partnership, he did not explicitly agree that France will participate. The Minister posed a number of questions regarding U.S. pandemic preparedness and Gilead and La Roche, patent-holder and manufacturer and distributor, respectively, of 'Tamiflu.' End Summary.

12. (U) The Ambassador accompanied by Economic Affairs Minister Counselor and Science Counselor met with Health Minister Xavier Bertrand, members of his cabinet, including diplomatic counselor Jean-Michel Linois, and the new interministerial coordinator for avian flu, Professor Didier Houssin, to seek French concurrence with the initiative to create a partnership of countries to address avian influenza preparedness. The Ambassador highlighted the longstanding and excellent U.S.-French health relationship and the need for countries to work together to combat what could become a devastating pandemic. A partnership of like-minded nations, he said, could plan together to prevent an outbreak from becoming a worldwide catastrophe.

13. (SBU) The Minister replied that an influenza pandemic constituted a "true risk." In the three months since he became Minister, pandemic preparedness had consumed much of his time. While he considered that France and the United States saw the problem in the same way and desired to be proactive on the subject, insufficient capacity existed worldwide to respond to a major outbreak. According to the Minister, "If an outbreak were to occur this year, we'd not be ready." Dr. Houssin, the interministerial avian flu coordinator, said that "a partnership could serve a useful purpose," particularly since the World Health Organization "could not do everything." However, the proposed partnership's relationship to the World Health Organization needed clarification. He added that at a recent 'Kuala Lumpur meeting' there was a call for donor assistance to prepare for a pandemic, especially in regard to building capacity for reacting to an outbreak. The Ambassador responded that a goal of the proposed partnership was to develop a strategy so that any outbreak did not get out-of-hand in the first place. The partnership could serve to provide overarching strategic guidance. He added that the partnership's ideas were not yet set in concrete; different countries can bring their best ideas to the group and the U.S. is very open to French thinking. The U.S. side quoted from the IPAPI core principles reinforcing this point.

14. (SBU) The Minister asked about the situation in the U.S., wanting to know in particular on what basis the Centers for Disease Control had concluded that a human-to-human H5N1 viral outbreak would occur in the next 12 to 24 months. He said that many felt that it was not a question of "if (there were to be an outbreak) but when." He said that French experts thought it highly likely that Southeast Asia would be where the outbreak would occur. He wondered what the United States might do to help Southeast Asians whose flocks of domestic birds might be destroyed, saying that there is discussion on this topic at the EU level. The Minister also asked about the Gilead - La Roche relationship and expressed personal concern that only one company manufactured the medicine Tamiflu. To all these questions, the U.S. side argued that a partnership of aware and concerned nations could most effectively coordinate resources and responses. The Minister concluded the meeting underscoring the need to prepare against a pandemic, noting that no one country can possibly do it alone.

Comment

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15. (SBU) The Health Minister avoided providing either an affirmative or negative response to whether France would subscribe to the proposed avian flu partnership. We are not sure why. (Foreign Ministry and Health officials had told ESTH counselor in previous meetings that the French government thought the core principles of the IPAPI were fine, posing no objections.) It could be that the French themselves plan to roll out an initiative on avian flu at UNGA and consequently felt it premature to respond to the IPAPI initiative now. Or, less conspiratorially, they may simply want greater detail and reassurances regarding how the partnership will work. For example, in a separate meeting between ESTH counselor and the new interministerial delegate for avian flu coordination in France, the latter repeatedly asked why IPAPI was not on the agenda for the upcoming meeting in Mexico of the Global Health Security Action Group (GHSAG). Argumentation that the partnership was a completely different way to tackle pandemic preparedness and that the concept for the partnership was brand new apparently fell on deaf ears.) The Embassy would be pleased to provide Minister Bertrand a short paper on U.S. preparedness measures to date with information regarding Tamiflu stockpiling.

STAPLETON